

Slider Ranma, chapter 2: Darkness

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Summary: The difference hits closer to home as Ranma must stop it from happening... at any cost. (Ranma/Slayers)

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Notes : This fic starts six months after the end of the manga, which means characters are a little more grown up, especially Ranma, and there are things that happened in-between that you'll find out as the fic goes on. C&C is greatly appreciated and can be sent at ranma_666@hotmail.com or ICQ# 45118495, and flames can go at someone@who-cares.com.

Warning : This chapter is dark. Not by its actions, but by the activities described in the past. The faint of heart refrain from imagining the events while they are being mentioned. Thank you.

Disclaimer

Ranma is not mine. Sliders is not mine.

What happened before:

Prologue : Ranma gets the timer from another sliding team, and Nabiki unexpectedly tags along.

Chapter 1 : On a world devastated by nuclear warfare, Ranma and Nabiki are forced into marriage. Ranma learns the breaking point by an enslaved Mousse before escaping.

This chapter starts on the third day of Ranma and Nabiki's travels.

" " spoken ' ' thought

Slider Ranma

Chapter 2 : Darkness

With a yell of surprise Nabiki fell once again on the ground, but knowing what was to come quickly moved as Ranma followed, hitting the dirt where she did. She looked around, and smiled. Same place, different earth, indeed. They were once again next to a lake, but this time, instead of a barren land, they were surrounded by a lush forest full of life. She sighed and once again began looking for dry sticks. Ranma sighed too and began unpacking his necessities to make camp. This time, he bothered to make the tent.

She came back to find everything ready, down to the fireplace, pot already hanging. She placed the wood and he ignited it, placing not long after the instant ramen in the boiling water. Not a word was exchanged in the uneasy silence, not even when they split the noodles.

Ranma was half-eating, half-playing with his ramen, not sure what to do or say. He had no idea how to act towards Nabiki now. Technically, they were married. But that had been forced. They had... been intimate, though that had been forced too. Well, he was pretty sure the last go hadn't been quite that necessary, but...

He shook his head slightly to clear his mind. It wouldn't do to let his thoughts wander that way. The truth was that he was married to Nabiki. No, wait. They had signed their fake names. No, that didn't matter, it still had been them at the altar. Not to mention in the bed.

So what was he to do? He knew that Nabiki didn't want to be married, even less to him. As for himself? He didn't know. Since a night he didn't want to remember over a month ago, he wasn't sure of any of his feelings. That was the only reason he had been able to talk so clearly to Akane the morning he had left. He had no idea how he really felt about anything.

Conclusion? Defer to Nabiki. He was sure she'd call the whole thing off as if it had never happened, anyway. He'd just wait for her to breach the subject. Yeah. That was it. He glanced at her quickly, as he took a mouthful. He had to stop himself from breathing for a few seconds before regaining control.

Nabiki seemed as deep in thought as he was, twirling her golden ring, which was still on her left ring finger. Ranma was surprised she hadn't removed it. Could she actually want to be married? No, that was ridiculous. But why hadn't she removed it yet? If anything, Ranma was even more confused.

Idly twirling the gold ring with her thumb, Nabiki wondered just what significance it had. No, she knew what it meant; she just wasn't sure of what it represented to her. Was it a fluke, just another weird thing so easily associated with Ranma, that had no value afterwards?

Or was it something real, with every possible meaning that usually came with the act?

She honestly didn't know. She had never been quite in touch with her feelings, and she was pretty sure such a decision should be based on them. Then again, marriage was also based on objectivity. Did she actually want to be married to Ranma? She didn't know. Before, she would have flat out refused, but now that it had been said and done, she was uncertain as to what her reaction should be.

Ranma was a fairly handsome young man; in fact, she knew that he had half of the female school population secretly pinning for him. Not a week went by that another girl came to her to get a date with him by whatever means necessary. They were all turned down, however. It was much more trouble to set up than it was worth, and the chances that it carried out smoothly were infinitesimal. Still, he was attractive.

There was also his somehow naive attitude concerning women, not to mention his inherent niceness. The Saotome charm Genma was always boasting about had to hold some truth, because even though Ranma had gotten his mother's good looks, there was no way Genma could have charmed Nodoka without some help. Some serious help.

But she was digressing. Ranma was still lacking two of the foremost things on her list; smarts and money. No, that was not completely true. Since the wedding incident, Ranma had matured, albeit slowly, and that had had repercussions on all aspects of his life. His grades had slightly improved, with no small prompting from his mother, and he was more sure of himself when dealing with others.

As for the money thing, while he had none now, he was bound to be a successful dojo master in the future. For a month or so after they returned from China, Ranma had gone on unchallenged. The entire thing had been kept secret - she had been sworn to secrecy herself - and that had only added more to Ranma's ever-growing reputation. So much that the dojo now had two classes, each taught by one of the fathers. The extra money had allowed her to stop blackmailing Ranma, and they had slowly gotten along better. They'd been not exactly friends, but more than acquaintances. But now...

Now, she just wasn't sure how they should act towards each other. Husband and wife? Lovers? Close friends? If anything, Ranma was the only friend she'd had in a long time, and she didn't want to lose him. What was the best way to make sure of that? Of course. Go with what he wanted. She didn't particularly like not being in control, but to keep a good friend like Ranma, she would. Whatever he decided was fine with her.

Finished eating, they rinsed the bowls with a little water before letting them dry near the fire. They spared a nervous glance at each other, locking eyes ever-so-quickly before immediately casting their gazes on the fire.

Ranma finally broke the uneasy silence. "I wonder where we are." he said, as much to himself as to her, as an attempt to have some conversation.

Nabiki jumped on the opportunity. "Lucky for you," she replied quickly, opening her school bag, "I always invest in the best and

prepare for every possibility." She took out her laptop, unzipped the plastic bag around it and turned it on.

"What are you doing?" he asked, always wary of technology. Not that he had anything against it, but he had learned to be cautious around things he didn't understand. And he certainly didn't understand computers.

"I have a cordless modem." she began, hoping that her counterpart had the same ISP and password. If not, she knew the school's vice-principal's, and that was less likely to be different. "I can access a satellite that will tell us where we are on a map of Japan." He nodded, only understanding the last part, and said "Cool." She shook her head, smiled as she received access and began hacking into the Global Positioning System.

After a few minutes, she turned her laptop so he could see it. "We're 146 kilometers south-west of Tokyo." He looked up from his drawing in the dirt and examined the map. He nodded and she closed it. "That's almost two days walking." she added.

"One day running." he said evenly. Her laptop was almost completely in her bag when, without breaking her stride, she got it out and turned it on again.

Back on the World Wide Web, she accessed some of the cab companies in town and calculated what it would cost her not to be in Ranma's arms again. Not that it was unpleasant, but the closeness would be rather uncomfortable. She found it acceptable and logged in to make the reservation. With a satisfied smile, she closed her computer and put it safely away.

"Well, I just booked us a cab. It should be on the 106 north of here at seven thirty tomorrow morning." He continued looking down. "That's nice. Thanks. It'll only take us half an hour to get there, and two hours of road. I'll split the cost, if you don't mind."

"Ranma, I checked your backpack, and you don't have enough." He showed little surprise.

"I'll pay what you'll let me. I can't let you do it all." Nabiki sighed to herself. Ranma was getting depressed, or something like that, and even more she was doing all the planning, thereby hurting his pride. She had to do something that would boost his morale. She yawned. Well, it'd have to wait for tomorrow.

"Come on, Ranma. Let's get to sleep." She removed her shirt and pants, hung them near the fire and dried herself before entering the small tent. 'No reason to be shy.' she thought bitterly, trying not to think of the reason for it.

Ranma looked at her get in the tent. Was it him or had there been a gleam in her eyes? No, that couldn't possibly be true. He removed his clothes and hung them next to Nabiki's. He put his armbands next to the fire, toweling himself dry afterwards. He then spent a good minute staring at the tent. "Are you coming or what? We have to get up early tomorrow." Resigning himself, though with no small amount of hesitation, Ranma entered the tent and laid down.

Back to back, the two were quite aware of the other behind them.

Neither moved, nor had their eyes closed. It was more than the warmth or the closeness of the other that caused the discomfort. It was the memory of the previous night, and the feel that the chemicals weren't completely gone. Eventually, their fatigue overcame their nervousness and they fell asleep.

Ranma got out of the cab while Nabiki paid, and observed the district. 'One week here shouldn't be so bad.' He thought, and began wondering what was different here. 'Nah,' he ended, 'let's find out the hard way.'

The cab finally left some of its tires on the street and disappeared from view. Ranma readjusted his pack and turned to her. "So, what do we do? Personally," he suggested, "I want to jump right in." She crossed her arms and leaned on one leg, in the process showing off her hips.

"And traumatize everyone?" she replied dryly, and he shamefully hung his head. "I think we should spy on the dojo first. Hearing our fathers conspiring to marry your counterpart to Akane should help us know what happened here."

"Unless I'm not engaged to Akane or I'm already married." Ranma countered. Nabiki looked surprised but quickly recovered. Too slow. "Didn't think of that, did you? That's also one of the reasons I decided to try this. To see the 'what ifs' of my own life. Maybe help with the decision I can't seem to make."

Nabiki nodded at this. "Pretty clever, Ranma. Didn't think you had it in you." He looked at her. "Well, okay. You *have* been getting wiser since you came back from China." she conceded. "So if you planned this, where do we go?"

"Don't know." he admitted. She almost snorted. "But I guess there's no place like home. I *do* agree with your idea of spying before, though. Know what we're getting into. That's something that could have helped me in the past."

"Make that 'would'." Nabiki replied. "Like the time you thought Akane was kidnapped again four months ago and she was planning her friend's birthday party." she added, smirking.

Ranma flushed of embarrassment. "Don't remind me. How was I supposed to know they were all wearing negligees?" he whined as Nabiki laughed.

"Ah, save it, Ranma. You liked that and you know it. So are we going or not?" He answered with a small grunt as he turned and began walking. Nabiki laughed again as she followed.

It took walking down one block for them to notice. There was no activity around. Nothing at all. It seemed as if the whole block was dead, and they suspected the district itself, from the double-take the taxi driver had made when he had heard their destination and the way he had driven off.

"Where's everybody?" Ranma asked, looking around. He jumped on the fence to take a higher look. "There's nothing nowhere."

"That's nothing *any*where, Ranma, and I don't know. We just got here, remember?" She looked around herself. After living there all of her life, or someplace eerily similar, it felt unnaturally weird to not see any sign of life. The 'fun' part of this adventure now practically disappeared. It would have completely if she didn't have Ranma with her. She now understood why Akane had said she never had been really worried each time she had been kidnapped. Still, he felt too far for her. She kicked the fence. "Get down here."

The chainlink fence was shaking like a leaf, yet Ranma still managed to keep his balance. "What for?"

"We should know what we're getting into before we're spotted by whatever scared the people of *Nerima* away." He shrugged in acknowledgement and hopped down the fence, looking at her. "Now, we look for people. Dr. Tofu's is close, so let's go there."

"Okay." Ranma followed her from a few steps behind, looking around, this time for threats. He knew Nabiki was counting on him. Nabiki could defend herself, if she absolutely had to, but anything that would scare off the people of Nerima would be way out of her league. Then again, this wasn't their Nerima, so the weirdness that they were familiar with perhaps never came in this world.

Still, that didn't mean whatever was out there wasn't dangerous. Ranma's danger sense was coming up with nothing, however, so he allowed himself to relax ever-so-slightly. Once they found someone, he'd know about the threat and could focus his efforts.

They found the clinic abandoned, though practically devoid of dust, and missing a lot of equipment. The place where the Ucchan's had been was a small kissaten, closed and barricaded. They had both blinked and made a comment about different worlds, then continued.

But it was where the Nekohanten once stood that managed to shock them. There was nothing but burned wood and ashes, with the odd object here and there, the only thing making the rubble recognizable being the sign, usually above the door, now broken in two, laying in front of the whole mess. "Holy crap!" Nabiki exclaimed first. "What the hell could have caused this?"

Ranma had also been shocked, but there was something else that had also caught his attention. There was... a sensation in the air, a feeling he couldn't quite identify. Wordlessly, he jumped in the middle of the ruined building, where the feeling intensified. He looked around, noticing the very faint circular pattern in the rubble, now evident as he stood in the center.

"Hiryu Shoten Ha." he whispered to himself, not quite willing to believe. Yet that feeling in the air was more than proof, as he could now associate it with the same he had had the last time he had performed the technique.

Despite the softness of his words, in the surrounding silence Nabiki managed to hear him. "Hiryu... Ranma? Are you saying that..." She wasn't willing to continue with the thought, as the consequences weren't particularly hopeful.

"Yes." he answered, his thoughts on the same trail. "And it's recent,

too. I can still feel it." He crouched and took a small amount of ashes in his hand. "Cologne ripped apart her own restaurant fighting whatever scared everyone off, and it happened last night." He threw the still warm ashes downward forcefully as he stood up. "I don't see any bodies here, so it's safe to say there are still survivors. Let's check your house, it makes a rather nice stronghold."

Nabiki nodded and started walking, joined on her side by Ranma soon after. If Cologne had had to do *that* to save herself, then whatever was out there was very strong, possibly even too much for the great Ranma Saotome himself. She gave a mental snort at that thought.

Still, she was even more glad then before to have Ranma with her, stuck on this crazy world. She wasn't about to blame Ranma for her being in danger in the first place, though. She was more level-headed than Ranma's other 'friends', and could admit to herself she was at fault in the first place.

But she'd never say it to him unless he was on a guilt trip, something rare, but if she was hurt by any threat on any world, he'd probably flip on her. She should probably ask him to train her a little, especially in defense, while on their journey. She knew enough to protect herself against normal people, especially bullies, but anything that Cologne had problems with was out of her league by a long shot.

They finally reached the Tendo residence, which seemed a little better from their point of view, but it could simply be the fact that this house had seen a lot less destruction. They both blinked at the spirit ward on the door in confusion before knocking loudly.

"Who's there?" came the rather quick reply, with an edge in the voice Ranma was quite familiar with. He gave a quick look to Nabiki, asking silently what they should say.

Nabiki shrugged, not really knowing anymore than him how to say they were counterparts from a parallel Earth. The very amount of explaining to do told her just how Ranma had planned to improve his social skills. Still, by the amount of staring he was doing towards her, she guessed Ranma wanted her to do the first step.

"Hum... Hi. We're travelers from a very different--" Nabiki was interrupted by a very enthusiastic Akane opening the door and glomping on her 'sister', shouting an overjoyed "NABIKI!!!" for everyone to hear.

Frozen in place by surprise and confusion, Nabiki was, for the first time she could remember, speechless. She looked at Ranma, who shrugged and shook his head in a 'don't ask me' manner.

The glomping girl registered her victim's movement and turned to see. "YOU!!!" she growled as loud as she could, letting go of Nabiki and charging Ranma like a maniac. Despite his surprise, Akane was too angry to properly attack, so he evaded easily.

"What's -- your -- problem?" he asked in-between mad swings, finishing with a long jump backwards, using the respite to throw his backpack away.

Akane stayed put, looking at him with deep hatred and barely restrained fury. Then she fell unconscious on the ground, hit by a figure behind her with a certain cane. Ranma relaxed his ready stance and looked at the old Chinese woman oddly.

"You have a lot of explaining to do, Ranma." she told him, breaking the silence. "If that's who you really are." she added, observing him.

Ranma sighed. Back to the main problem, explaining who they were. "I'd be glad to explain this, but I think we should get her somewhere comfortable first." he said, pointing to the prone figure on the ground.

"She will have to wait, for the moment." Cologne replied. "I am not letting you or your companion inside this house before I can confirm your intentions."

"Oh, boy." Nabiki commented to herself, almost rolling her eyes. "Listen, Cologne, if we actually intended you any harm, we'd be already fighting." She waited a moment; no reply. "All we want is to know what the hell is going on in this crazy world of yours." She glanced at Ranma, judging what his face was saying. "And help, if we can." she added, noting the small smile rising on his lips.

Cologne observed the two, pondering what information she had. The two seemed sincere, and she was feeling no magic around them that could indicate control or brainwash. The girl looking like Nabiki was harmless, but it was the boy that was the threat. But still, it didn't make any sense to send spies looking like them, and the Ranma look-alike had yet to even appear to attack.

She made her decision. "Very well." she finally said. "Let us take this discussion inside." Still not trusting completely the two, she carried the unconscious girl inside herself.

She unceremoniously dumped Akane on the couch. "So, who are you?" she asked, turning to face them. She noted they were familiar with the house, wasting no time getting cushions and making themselves comfortable. She sat herself.

"We're travelers from another Earth." Nabiki said bluntly. Ranma gave her a look of surprise and she shrugged in reply. She didn't really see another way of saying things.

Cologne's eyes widened but she quickly recovered. "I see... Do you have any proof of your claims?"

Ranma raised his hand in front of Nabiki before she spoke. She closed her mouth, and with a smile and a wave of her hand, gave him the floor. "If I know you as well as I think I do, Cologne, you should be able to tell who we really are just by looking at us. Or rather, at our chi."

"Oh, really?" Cologne feigned surprise and confusion as she checked. "And how would you know?"

He considered his answer. "Because I can tell myself." he replied. "I've begun seeing auras with a little concentration since I k-- for the last six months or so." Nabiki was the only one who caught his

slip of the tongue. "I noted every person is slightly different. We should have the same chi pattern as our counterparts since yours is the same as your counterpart in our world." He altered his vision slightly to check just to be sure of his claim.

"Indeed." Cologne acquiesced, satisfied with her examination. "You are indeed who you claim to be. How did you come to this world?"

"That's a loaded question." Nabiki answered.

"Yeah." Ranma added. "I'd prefer knowing first who attacked you last night that needed the Hiryu Shoten Ha to keep you alive."

"You know the technique?" Cologne asked, one eyebrow raised. Inside, she began fitting pieces together. Knowing the technique meant her other self trusted the boy enough to teach him. And the strength needed to learn it was far above the Ranma she knew had.

"It's been useful at times." Ranma replied off-handedly. "So, who was it?"

Storing his nonchalancy away for later, Cologne cleared her throat. "Ukyo Kuonji." She stopped, waiting for the travelers' reaction.

"What?!?" Ranma blurted out, shocked beyond belief. "But you could beat her in your sleep!" he quickly added.

"Maybe your version of the girl, but not ours. After Genma abandoned her ten years ago, she somehow managed to contact demonic forces." Ranma and Nabiki went pale. "She made a deal and either was possessed or was given demonic powers as a result. I do not know the exact extent of her powers, but she is limited to darkness and the cycle of the moon."

"Cycle of the moon?" Ranma raised a hand to scratch the side of his head. "But it's a crescent."

"What? It was a full moon last night, Ranma." Nabiki said. "I clearly remember seeing the moon in the sky before going to sleep."

"But I saw the crescent the night before we were kidnapped in the last world." Ranma countered. "That doesn't make sense."

"Unless time is not a constant in your travels." Cologne interjected. The two looked at her, Nabiki with understanding and Ranma with confusion. "But we can talk about this later. I believe we were talking about our current threat?"

The two nodded. "Good. As I said, she is governed by darkness and the moon, or more precisely, she can only endure natural light from the full moon. She can only come out the night of the full moon and of the new moon."

Ranma blinked. "I've fought demons before, and they were all perfectly happy to go after me in broad daylight. Why's she different?"

"I am not sure, but let us not look a gift horse in the mouth. If we

could destroy her hideout, the light would seriously weaken her, and we would be able to destroy her."

"Whoa! You want to *kill* her? Wouldn't defeating her be enough? And you could exorcise her after or something? I don't want to kill her. I-" Ranma's voice broke as he looked at his shaking hands. "I won't kill. I won't." His hands clenched into fists, no longer shaking, as he looked up at Cologne with fire in his eyes. "Not again."

Cologne found herself unable to disagree. "I believe I have the proper rituals somewhere. I will look." she quickly said before retrieving herself. "But we still have to find her hiding place first. I have tried every night for the last two weeks, but I have been constantly interrupted. Perhaps with you around, things will be different tonight."

"They will." Nabiki said calmly, putting a hand on Ranma's shoulder to calm him a little. "Now maybe you could tell us what happened to make this Akane so... emotional."

"That is also a loaded question," Cologne replied with a smile, "but for your continued safety I will answer. A month ago, at night of course, Ukyo came to get her fiancée, Ranma. He wasn't there, so she took Nabiki as an hostage, to guarantee Ranma would be there two weeks later. When she came back, she only said she had bigger plans for her, meaning she is alive, for the moment."

"Meaning we have to get her out of the hideout, before blowing everything up. Okay, we can do that, what's next?"

"Well..." Cologne looked down. "Two weeks ago, she returned. I... underestimated her greatly, and thought my help wasn't needed. Shampoo was the first to die at her hands." The two travelers gasped, wide-eyed. "Mousse went crazy and attacked her, with the obvious result. Ukyo got hold of Ranma, and started the spell to take control of him. Akane attacked her, and Ryoga took the lethal blow meant for her as retaliation. She was only knocked out."

"She finished her spell on Ranma, and decided to have a little fun with the remaining occupants. She killed a cowering Genma for pure revenge and removed Soun's eyeballs because his crying annoyed her. She then decided to test Ranma's loyalty to her."

"It was, sadly, Kasumi's turn. She had been constantly trying to soothe Ukyo and convince her that violence was not a solution. Ukyo said that since she wasn't willing to see the world as it was, she shouldn't see at all. Ranma pierced her eyes with a knife."

"Oh god." Nabiki said, while Ranma's eyes and fists only clenched more.

"My tale is, sadly, not finished. It was right after this that Akane decided to wake up. Ukyo decided to have Ranma... rape her."

Nabiki clamped a hand over her mouth so not to scream, but Ranma had no such reservations. He shot up and grabbed the Old woman by the shirt. "NO!!!"

"YES!!!" came the reply, from the newly woken Akane. She jumped from her position, separated Cologne from Ranma and smacked him a good one

right on the jaw, sending him soaring outside.

Ranma backflipped, landing easily on his feet, position at the ready. "I'm not your Ranma!" he said quickly, without much success as she rushed him. He sidestepped with a twist, gently pushing her with a foot all the way into the pond.

Not knowing how to swim, the girl began thrashing wildly, screaming for help between large gulps of air. Ranma watched this in confusion, as he knew from experience the pond was only waist deep. "You can stand." he finally said to her.

She stopped, understood her position and flushed of embarrassment. Then she remembered who was standing right in front of her and got angry again. She climbed out of the pond and rushed him once more. "I'll kill you!"

Inside, Cologne and Nabiki watched this with resignation. "When do you think she'll calm down?" the latter asked.

"I have no idea." the former replied. "She has been getting angrier than usual whenever Ranma was mentioned since... And now, she has him, or rather his counterpart, right in front of her. I'd say a few hours, unless Ranma decides to fight back."

"Then we have a few hours to spare." Nabiki concluded. "So where are Soun and Kasumi?"

"They are at a physiotherapy clinic for the day with Dr. Tofu, to accustom themselves to blindness." She began walking back inside. "Now, about this method of travel of yours..."

Back on the travelers' home dimension, Akane was feeling, slowly but surely, worse. Ranma's departure had been rather private, and without Nabiki to back her up, nobody believed what she was saying. They all had their own twisted version of why Ranma had left, and they all blamed her for it, of course. No matter what she said, they wouldn't listen to her.

On the second day, Kuno had made a speech that, somehow, motivated the old Akane Tendo Fan Club to reassemble and restart the morning fights for a date. She had beaten them into the ground faster than she ever had before. Still, Kuno had also improved, and she had almost lost. Not by injuries, but by fatigue. She hated to admit it, but the training Ranma had been giving her lately had been more than useful.

On the third day, Shampoo and Ukyo had attacked her, demanding to know what she had done to Ranma. The rain had taken care of Shampoo, while a lucky disarming kick had left Ukyo an easy target. But that was the easy part.

The worst had come at dinner on the fourth day. They were finally concerned enough about Nabiki's continued disappearance to try an in-depth search around, when Kasumi had made a simple observation. "The last we've heard of Nabiki was the morning Ranma left. Could they have run off together?"

She had been so shocked that the others' reactions had been totally lost on her. And now, she was on her bed, hugging her pillow, wishing she had P-chan to comfort her. She was still too much in shock to have any other kind of reaction. The thought of Ranma and Nabiki as a couple was simply too mind-boggling.

Slowly, Kasumi's words penetrated her higher brain functions, and she managed to accept the possibility. 'He... he said I had a chance!' was the first thing that popped into her mind. 'He told me I had as much chance as the others! And then he runs off with my *own* *sister*!!!!' At this point, the pillow in her hands was seriously twisted.

Akane refused to believe it. Ranma never lied. In fact, he tended to blurt out the truth whenever possible, usually in the worst way. While it was true that Ranma had problems when talking about his feelings, he had been so calm that morning that he couldn't have lied. It simply wasn't possible. But all the evidence pointed to that fact.

It was at that point that the second implication hit her. 'He left me!' That thought hit her almost as hard as Kasumi's words. 'He... he left me... After all that's happened, he left me...' The tears started to flow. 'But I... I l-... I lo-... I like him... How could he leave me?' She buried her head in her pillow to hide the sobbing.

Ranma looked at the dimming light over the horizon, wondering what hardships he would find in the darkness of night. He stood in the dojo's only entrance, the rest of the building having been heavily fortified to make sure the disruptor could only come through the door.

And for the first time, he found himself eager to fight, a thin smile on his lips. For his opponent was to be himself. Yes, it was a Ranma with over a year of skill and training behind, not to mention certain special techniques, but he was hoping that the strength, speed and resistance added by the demon, as Cologne had mentioned, would compensate. True, he had fought copies of himself in the past, but they had been merely that, copies, and didn't stand up to the original. But his adversary was as much an original as he was.

And so Ranma contemplated. He was hoping the shock of seeing a double of himself would cause the other Ranma to hesitate long enough for him to gain the advantage, but he had fought long enough to know not to rely on such thoughts. He calmly stood, seemingly unprepared as he leaned against the doorframe, but underneath, every muscle was tense, at the ready, every sense stretched out, registering beyond the usual five, hundreds of battle scenarios and opportunities playing in his head.

For when it came to battle, none were as prepared as Ranma Saotome.

And so it came to surprise to him when Cologne stepped out, standing next to him. "Are you ready, Ranma?"

"I thought you knew me." Ranma replied, deviating from his previous

position only by a smirk. The old woman smiled knowingly, nodding. "What about you, old-- I mean, Cologne? Everything ready back there?"

"Indeed." she said, turning to look at the horizon. "I am simply waiting for the right time to begin. But my question was not directed towards your physical readiness. I would never doubt it. I was referring to your state of mind." Ranma didn't move. "Or, more precisely, the state of your marriage."

"What?!?" Ranma jumped from his position to face the old Amazon. "Who said I was married?" he asked incredulously, pointing at her with his left index. In the silence that followed, Ranma turned his left hand slightly, showing the plain band of gold on his ring finger. "Oh. Eh... He he he..." Left hand now behind his head, he began laughing uncomfortably.

"Don't worry about it, Ranma. Nabiki told us all how you two preferred not to reveal you were married in your travels." Ranma froze in shock, a myriad of questions popping into his mind. "She was also shy and nervous when mentioning your marriage. It is perfectly normal for newly married couples, Ranma. But I felt a tension between you two at dinner, and I fear such a distraction may prove problematic tonight. Perhaps I could help you."

"Oh, eh, well..." Ranma was still trying to grasp the concept of Nabiki actually wanting to be married, and to him, no less. Then again, she usually used some kind of suggestive approach with him in their dealings, private or not, and he did remember a slight blush on her cheeks when she had walked in on him a little while ago. Was he to conclude that Nabiki secretly had feelings for him? No, that was ludicrous. But she said to everyone here that they were married, so...

"Ranma? Are you there, sonny boy?" Cologne was waving her staff in front of his vacant eyes. He shook his head and slapped the weapon away. "Ah! Good. You zoned out for a minute, there. Are you all right?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm all right." Ranma waved it off. "Just thinkin'. What else did Nabiki say about us?"

"Not much, only that you were recently married. Are you sure there is nothing you would like to say? Unburden yourself with? I can give you advice on many things." The smirk that ended that phrase showed just how many things she was thinking of.

"No, no, I'm fine." Ranma repeated. "Just a... minor miscommunication problem. You know how that goes." Ranma returned to his position, leaning on the dojo's doorframe. "We just need to have a long talk to clear things. It's nothing you should concern yourself with." He looked back at the horizon, noting there was nothing left of the sun's light. 'Man, it's only been a few days and Nabiki's rubbing off on me.' He thought to himself. 'I wonder how much of me is rubbing off on her...'

"Very well, then." Cologne concluded, turning back to enter the dojo. "I will attend to my own, and you make sure nobody, and I mean *nobody*, goes through this door."

"Yeah, yeah." Ranma replied offhandedly. In his mind, the woman was working herself up over nothing. How could she doubt that he wouldn't perform? The thought of losing was simply ridiculous. And that thought was shaken by a staff to the head.

"Do not take this matter lightly, boy. I am running out of components for this particular ritual. With you here, I am expecting peace and quiet on my end so that this can finally succeed. Am I understood?"

Ranma knocked the annoyance away. "Yeah, yeah. Geez. Would you stop making a big deal out of this?" His reply was an incredulous glare. "Oh. Right. This is a big deal. Okay then." Ranma straightened himself. "On my honor as a martial artist, none shall come through this door until your ritual is done. Is that satisfactory?"

A bit surprised by such a response, Cologne simply nodded and went inside. If this Ranma was anything like the one she knew, then she pitied the one who tried to enter the dojo.

Later...

"I can't believe you had trouble with this guy, Cologne." Ranma said, entering the house while rotating his left arm. "I mean, he was a little stronger than me because of the demon, but I still had the edge in speed and skill. It was just a question of getting through his goddamned stone skin." He shook his hurting knuckles. "He was tougher than Ryoga..."

"I never said I had problems fighting your counterpart, Ranma." Cologne replied, following him to the kitchen. "It was simply a question of getting through the ritual undisturbed. Which I've finally been able to do, thanks to you."

Ranma paused just before the water bottle touched his lips. "Uh? But you said it failed, right before he vanished in that black smoke."

"Of course I said it failed." Cologne smiled. "If I had said the ritual had succeeded, the demon would have moved before we had the time to strike. As long as she believes we do not know of her location, she will stay where she is, and we will have time to properly plan our attack."

He put the empty bottle on the counter. "So you're saying we have to keep the facade until we're ready." She nodded. "No prob. It'll get me a chance to try out a few moves I came up with." He yawned loudly. "Well, it's really late. I'm gonna hit the couch."

He had time to take three steps before Cologne reacted. "You won't be sleeping with your wife?"

Ranma froze and blinked. "My wife?" A few seconds passed. "Oh, my wife! Yes, hum, well, I, hum..." Ranma had a hand behind his head as he thought. "It's that, hum, we haven't had a chance to, hum, talk yet, so I'd rather not take my chances with--"

"Say no more, Ranma, say no more." Cologne interrupted, laughing as she pogoed away. She stopped and turned to look at him over her shoulder. She shook her head and resumed laughing as she walked away.

Face flushed in embarrassment and anger, Ranma stomped to the couch and flopped on it. "I definitively need to talk to my 'better half' about this." he muttered as he buried himself in the couch.

"So, how do we go about this?" Ranma asked Cologne, observing the two eager students. Both had different looks in their eyes, but both made him nervous.

"Well, if this morning is any indication," Cologne began with a smile, referring to Akane jumping on the sleeping Ranma to strangle him on the couch, "you should teach your wife and I will handle Akane."

Ranma took one look at Nabiki, standing feet together and hands in front of her, looking so shy and demure, with a twinkle in her eyes. 'She's acting, she's acting, she's acting...' he constantly told himself.

"Well, hum, actually, Cologne," Ranma said hesitantly, "I think Nabiki would benefit more from an experienced teacher like yourself." Cologne raised an eyebrow at him. Ranma began sweating. "And, hum, Akane needs to work out her anger if she's gonna be level-headed against the demon, and I'm the perfect target, aren't I?" he added nervously.

"Indeed." Cologne simply said, smiling at the underlying reasons. "You are aware, however, that training Akane requires you hitting her?"

He froze at that. Did it? Of course it did. It simply couldn't be otherwise. One look at the hopefully acting Nabiki, however, convinced him of the wisdom of revising his rule about hitting girls. Maybe he could add a clause about martial artists or something. Yeah. He could do that. Approaching Akane nervously, Ranma was only sure of one thing. Whatever his conscience did to him for striking Akane, it couldn't be worse than what Nabiki had in mind for him.

A world away, another Akane was having her own set of problems. "For the last time," she screamed at the other two fiancées, "I haven't done anything to Ranma! He took off on a training trip!"

"Shampoo no believe violent girl." She brought her bonbori up at the ready, Ukyo copying the movement with her own weapon. "What you do to Ranma?"

"I told you, I haven't done anything! Now go away, I'd like to eat my lunch in peace!" Akane sat forcefully on the ground, turning her back to the two girls as she leaned on the tree with her left shoulder. She had time to open her lunch bag and take out an apple before the girls circled her.

"This is your last warning, sugar. Tell us what you did for Ranma, or you're in for a world of pain."

Akane's barely controlled anger started boiling, and she stood up, aura flaring to life as she turned madder than hell. "You want to know?!? Fine!!! Ranma ran off with my sister!!!" At this point, she didn't care about the implications of screaming that bit of information in the schoolyard. Nearly the whole school heard.

"What?!?" the two martial artists screamed in shock. Shampoo was the first to recover. "Ayah! Shampoo find hard to believe Ranma run away with nice-nice girl Kasumi."

After getting up from her facefault, Akane growled at the amazon. "Not Kasumi, you bimbo! Ranma ran off with Nabiki! They both disappeared four days ago!"

The three of them stood there, two shocked, one glaring, as the students in the schoolyard began talking amongst themselves about this latest piece of gossip. And boy was it a juicy one.

The training session done, Ranma waited for Akane to leave, limping, before rubbing a bruise on his jaw, carefully moving it. It had been the only time Akane had connected, the final hint that their sparring had become something more. He had finally been forced to attack without holding his punches and kicks, since a mad Akane had a practically endless energy supply.

"So, how did it go?" Cologne asked, walking in. Ranma gave her a look. "I see. So you've finally managed to hit back, eh? I must say, you've made the decision at just the right time. Or was it simply a survival instinct, a reflex?"

"I'm not sure." Ranma said, scratching the back of his neck. "I didn't have much time to think once I realized she was fighting for real. I knew what I was doing, but I didn't do anything to stop it. It was kinda weird."

"I see." Cologne said, nodding. "Then you will keep 'practicing' until your misguided attitude has left your subconscious. It is fortunate that you are here for a week. I will have time to search for an exorcism ritual while you train. Otherwise, I would go after the demon right away."

"You sure you'd win? I mean, you used the Hiryu Shoten Ha in your own restaurant and she's still alive."

"That is the main reason I am waiting after you. While I now know the demon's attacks and what to expect, with you at my side, the fight shouldn't be too difficult. That is the only reason I am exploring the possibility of exorcising the demon."

"Well, I guess I owe you one for that. I believe we still have an hour before lunch, though, so how about you tell me what you can about the demon. Lives are at stake, here, so I'd prefer if I knew what I'm getting into."

"Of course," Cologne replied, taking a step back and a ready position, "but I believe it is better shown than told."

With a grin, Ranma also stood at the ready, nearly five yards from her. He was ready for anything the old ghou! could throw at him. He and her had fought often before, and he was pretty sure he had seen the majority of her repertory. And so he was completely surprised when Cologne let go of a rather large blue chi-blast at him.

Not having the time to completely move out of the way, Ranma gathered as much chi as he could in his short second and launched the yellow ball against the blue one. "Moko Takabisha!"

The two blasts met a few feet in front of him, and while his own wasn't strong enough to counterreact the other fully, what was left was sparse enough to only blow a strong wind past him, which he protected his face from with his arms.

"That was a mean trick, Cologne." he said once the air was clear. "If I had dodged that, you would have blown a hole in the wall."

"The dojo is hardly of any importance, Ranma, and walls can be repaired." She pogoed closer to him. "What I really wanted to know was if you were capable of chi manipulation. The demon is quite powerful in that area and I wished to make sure you were capable of defending yourself."

Ranma grinded his teeth. That sounded very much like his own Cologne, devious and tricky. "And did I pass your test with satisfactory results?" he asked sarcastically through clenched teeth.

Cologne laughed. "Yes, yes, above and beyond. But your speed needs to be worked on. You had more than enough time to overpower such a weak blast."

Only Cologne could stay unharmed after such a declaration. Ranma also knew that he was rather new at this area of martial arts, while she had hundreds of years of experience. "Okay, then. What kind of 'exercise' do you suggest?"

"Exercise? With chi? Do not be ridiculous, young man." Cologne said, smirking. "You would exhaust yourself before making any serious progress, especially since you are only starting." She shook her head. "No, there are no specific exercises for this."

"So how the hell am I supposed to get better if there ain't exercises for this kinda thing?"

"There is one special technique that would allow you to properly open yourself to the flow of chi in your body and give you more control, amongst other things." She saw the eager gleam in Ranma's eyes. "However, it is a prized Amazon technique taught to only the most worthy of warriors."

Ranma rolled his eyes. "Cologne, your stupid Amazon pride didn't stop you from teaching me the Amaguriken, the Hiryu Shoten Ha and helping me on dozens of occasions, even when it guaranteed I wouldn't marry Shampoo as a result. And now you're saying you won't teach me something that could help tremendously against a demon? This isn't just for the tribe, Cologne, it's for the world's common good. So shove your pride somewhere, show you're human and teach me the goddamn technique, all right?"

Cologne chuckled. "I never said I would not teach it to you, Ranma, I only wanted to make sure you would be discreet in your use and mention of the technique, especially back on your own world."

"Eh eh eh. Sorry." he said meekly. "So, hum, anyway, what's the technique?"

"The technique is called the Amazon Splitting Cat Hairs. If your world is as similar as mine, then you should remember it from the first day we met."

The memory came with a little thought. "Yeah! You were circling me with about a dozen images of yourself. You mean you did that with chi?"

"Yes. This technique requires ultimate control over your chi, as you must be able to make it take shape and move as you desire outside of your body. The first step is this..."

The night fell on Ranma's fifth day in that crazy world. Like any other day back in his home dimension, martial arts had dominated his time. Train Akane, train with Cologne, train Akane, practice alone, spar with Cologne until he dropped on the couch. He hadn't spoken one word with Nabiki since he had arrived there, since Nabiki had decided to declare them married.

Everytime he thought about her, a weird feeling entered him, one he could not quite place, and though he knew he had to face her some time, he preferred to focus on the matter at hand. Training to defeat the demon was far more important than a dispute. At least, from his point of view.

Cologne came out of the dojo to stand next to him, watching as well the fading light at the horizon. "Are you ready?"

Ranma snorted. "You have to ask? I've beaten the guy easily the last three times. Have some faith in me, Cologne. Just make sure your performance is believable. I don't want her to make fools out of us."

"Do not worry, young man. This deception only has to last one more night, maybe two, and we will be ready to attack."

"Two more nights? That's cutting it a little close. Nabiki and I are leaving in four days, you know, and the cave where Ukyo's hiding is rather far. I'd like to have a good night's sleep and be back here before sliding."

"Do not worry yourself, my boy. Everything will go according to plan." She looked at the horizon. "The moon is rising. Be ready." And she returned inside.

"'Everything will go according to plan...'" Ranma repeated to himself. "Where have I heard that before?" His time for musing was over as his counterpart appeared on the rock near the pond in a puff of black smoke. Ranma looked at the evil grin on the other's face, thought of how he'd wipe it off and let out a grin of his own. "Time to fight."

Seventh day, after lunch...

"So we're going after her tomorrow, huh?" Cologne nodded. "Well, that's fine and dandy, but like I said before, I'd like to get a good night's sleep before we slide the day after. Getting there is long enough, but we don't know how long the fight or the exorcism are gonna take..."

"Do not worry, young man. The good doctor has volunteered to provide us with some transportation. At the very worst, everything should be done by the next dawn, giving you plenty of time to rest. Now, do you wish to train?" She motioned towards the dojo. "You have the technique down, but you still need some fine-tuning to properly have the benefits."

"Well, not today, Cologne." Ranma replied, somewhat hesitantly. "There's something I'd like to work on before I forget it, and I have to be elsewhere. You work with the girls, I should be back before supper."

"Oh? And what would this 'something' be?" Cologne asked, curious. She had never known Ranma, this one or the other, to turn down training.

Ranma fidgeted in place. "Well, it's something that could be really useful if I can do it again, but I'd rather not get your hopes up right now. I'll tell you at dinner how it works out. See ya." With a two-finger salute from the top of his head, Ranma took to the rooftops and soon disappeared.

Cologne turned to Nabiki across the table. "Nabiki, do you know what he was talking about?"

She shrugged. "Not really. It could be something about the breaking point, though. He learned it in the last world, and knowing him he probably improved on it already."

"Yes, child, that he may have." Cologne turned her head to look outside. "Though he should have asked me about it. I know the few variations of the technique." She smirked. "Then again, this is Ranma. Stubborn man never asking for help."

"Maybe yours, but not mine." Nabiki countered. "For the last six months, he's managed to swallow some of his pride and actually ask."

Her head cocked sideways. "Six months? I've heard this number before. Tell me, what exactly happened to Ranma six months ago?" She leaned forward.

"Hum, well..." Nabiki wasn't sure if Ranma would appreciate. Then again, he might not hear of it, and it would prevent Cologne from asking him, which would make him even more uncomfortable. "Ranma... well, it's rather long and complicated, and I don't have all of the information, but what it comes down to is that Ak-" Nabiki stopped herself, hiding it with a cough. If they were married, it didn't make sense that Ranma had done this for her sister. She'd have to switch

roles with her.

"Excuse me. As I was saying, I was in mortal danger, and the only thing that stood between Ranma and my cure was this Saffron guy." Cologne's eyes widened at the name. "So... Ranma killed him."

Akane, the only other one present, gasped, while Cologne managed to control her reaction. "Saffron? As in Saffron, king of--"

"Yes, Saffron, king of Phoenix Mountain. And I'd appreciate it if you would leave it at that, no mention to Ranma that I said this, okay?"

"If what you say is true, then I have no desire to anger your husband." Cologne said evenly. "But let us keep to the matter at hand. Which one of you would like to train this afternoon?"

Nabiki and Akane looked at each other. "I will." the latter said, reading the look in the other's eyes. "I just need to talk to my sister for a second."

"Very well." Cologne turned and hopped out. It had surprised her that the Tendo girls had considered the second Nabiki their sister, but she left such matter to philosophers. Then again, if an amazon came from another world, she would treat her as one. But family? She wasn't sure she would act that way herself.

The old woman gone, Akane turned to face Nabiki. "Nabiki, hum..." she began shyly, voice soft. "Did he really kill a man to save your life?"

She raised an eyebrow, surprised. "Yes. He did. What about it?"

"Then... I'm happy for you, Nabiki. If Ranma is willing to do that for you, he must love you very much."

Nabiki looked down, blushing from embarrassment. She hadn't thought her little lie would have gone this far. "Hum... Thanks." A few seconds passed. "Does this mean you'll stop attacking him randomly in a blind rage?" she asked, looking up with a smirk.

Akane laughed as she got up. "I'll try. It's just..." She looked down, face sad. "It's hard to forget."

"I understand." Nabiki said softly. "Just don't kill him, okay?" she added with a small smile.

She copied it. "I won't. Just promise me you'll hang on to him, no matter what."

"I promise." Nabiki said, without thinking, the words surprisingly easy to come out. "You just go practice now." With a nod and a smile, Akane walked out, leaving her sister to ponder her feelings for the umpteenth time in the last week.

"Well, isn't that peculiar." Nabiki said, the first to speak after

Dr. Tofu had presented them their ride to the demon's cave. A jeep. The kind of jeep you can just take apart for a sunny day, and this one had all of the detachable elements missing. No doors, no top, no windshield, only the bar in the middle, supporting spotlights.

"How the hell are we supposed to fit in this thing?!?" Ranma screamed to no one in particular, waving at the jeep. "We're five and we'll have three more passengers coming back, and that's not mentioning the baggage!"

"I'm sorry, Ranma," Tofu replied, not at all offended, "but it was the only thing available. Most of the rentals aren't back yet from the big move a few weeks ago."

"Oh." Ranma said sheepishly. "All right, then. Let's see if we can make this puzzle fit together." He grabbed a bag and loaded it into the jeep.

It took them half an hour, but they managed to find a way to pack all of them in the jeep with the bags without the chance of losing anything -- or anyone. Ranma had been curious as to the inventory in the many bags, but had retracted his question halfway through the list -- on both Tofu's and Cologne's parts. And then there was his backpack and Nabiki's schoolbag, just in case things took too long.

Whether it was an actual demon or an altered Ukyo, she still had chosen her hideout well. Two hours of road had led them to a gravel trail twisting and turning in a constantly more suffocating forest, up to the point where a person couldn't have walked in the middle without watching out for branches. And then, two trees were close enough together to prevent going forward.

"It would seem we are walking from this point on." Cologne observed, jumping off the jeep. "It is fortunate that the cave is not far off." Along with Akane and Nabiki, she began removing bags from the jeep.

After going through the branches, Ranma joined them. "Really? How far is it?"

"A mile and a half." she answered, smirking. Ranma glared at her after picking himself up from the ground, and picked up the heavy medical supplies bag.

"I'll take point." Instead of going around the jeep, Ranma went over it to avoid branches. One hand holding the straps over his shoulder, Ranma used the other to clear the path of small branches with the Amaguriken, keeping his pace fast and steady.

He nearly didn't avoid the waterfall that suddenly appeared out of nowhere. Carefully choosing his stepping stones, he shouted a warning to the others before returning on his way. As he walked, Ranma wondered. 'If this had been my world, I would have been splashed for sure. So why wasn't I here? It's still me, I still have the curse... It doesn't make sense.'

He pulled his head back at the last second before hitting a tree dead on. "Whoa... Back home, I *would* have hit that... Could it be that finally...No, that can't be true... But there's no other

explanation... So that means... I'm finally lucky! I finally have good luck!"

In his joy, Ranma bent his back backwards as he stretched his arms to the sky, a happy smile on his lips. Inadvertently bending a strong branch until it whipped over his fist and smacked him right in the back of the head, sending him stumbling forward until he tripped on a tree root and fell face first in a small mudhole.

He raised his head from the mud, using his free hand to wipe off what he could. "Well, maybe not good luck." he reasoned. "I'll go with less bad luck and see where it leads me first." After getting up and wiping his face with a few large leaves, he continued down the dirt trail.

Another half hour of walking brought him to a small clearing, the beginning of a stone mountain at the other end, where a dark hole lay hidden in the shadows. "Bingo." He put down his bag, spotted a rather large tree and went to rest under its shade.

Hands behind his head as he leaned against the strong, dark bark, Ranma spared a look towards the cave. A rather flat section of grass grabbed his interest, to be discovered as a fallen wooden panel. Curious, he went over it and raised it to see what was on it.

"Warning: abandoned mine shaft. Do not enter." he read aloud. He pushed it back so it leaned against a large stone, almost vertical. "Damn. This is gonna be tougher than we thought." he said to himself, putting his hands on his hips.

"Why do you say that?" a voice behind him asked, and he twirled into a ready position to face whoever it was. The rest of the group had finally caught up, Akane in the lead.

"I say that because this 'cave' is an abandoned mine shaft." he answered, pointing at the panel and staring at Cologne. "This thing has enough twists and side tunnels that we'll die of hunger before we find her in there."

Cologne hummed. "I admit that such a situation has us at a disadvantage. To properly search we would need to split up, thereby making us vulnerable. Very clever."

"If I may?" Nabiki piped in. Cologne gave her the stage with a wave of her hand. "Ranma, what do you remember of the last demon Happosai sent after you?"

Ranma's hand went to his head as he tried to remember. "Uh, do you mean the giant crab thing with the head of a dragon or the big dog with three heads?"

"No, those were monsters. I'm talking about a demon. You know. Ten feet tall, black and blood red skin, horns and claws, wrists bigger than my waist..."

"Oh! You mean Maxwell, the guy Happosai sent after me a month after we came back from China?" Nabiki nodded. "How could I forget? First major thing that happened after that. What about him?"

"Do you remember how he acted?"

"Yeah, sure. Typical demon. Humiliate, torture and kill all who stand in his way. Whatcha getting at?" Ranma understood before she could reply. "Okay. I get it. The labyrinth of the mine is meant as humiliation." He continued slow as he made the reasoning. "And the best way to humiliate us from getting lost in there would be to hide in the obvious place, which would be the end of the main shaft."

"And that's where we need to go." Nabiki finished joyfully. "So shall we?" She turned to face the others with a beaming smile.

Who were, quite predictably, staring at the two of them, dumbfounded. "Am I the only one missing something here?" Akane asked after a few seconds.

"I am afraid not, child." Cologne answered. "The ease with which they speak of such experiences is disturbing, to say the least, but it is the last of our concerns for the moment. We should select what baggage we are taking inside before we proceed."

They decided to travel light. Akane was to carry the items necessary for the exorcism, while the good doctor took with him supplies to treat serious wounds quickly, minor ones were to be tended to outside of the mine. Nabiki would thread the rear with a map and a compass, to try to pinpoint their location. With large flashlights, Ranma and Cologne led the group inside, carrying a length of rope each.

"Oh, crap." Ranma said after awhile, once they were deep enough to no longer see the entrance. His spotlight was stopped on a large puddle of water, drops coming from the ceiling adding to it. "This cave is full of water. I can't afford to change here."

"Do you really think you can keep avoiding water all day long?" Nabiki asked, amused, voice echoing from the rear. Since glaring at her was mostly pointless because of the darkness, Ranma decided to go with a low growl, to which she laughed.

"Please, *children*." Cologne interrupted. "We do not wish to warn the demon of our coming. Be quiet." She spoke with a finality that was hard to resist.

The five made their way deeper into the mine, going down old moldy ropes and across small gaps. The mine was old indeed, for the cave was far from regular, and some very rusted shovels and pickaxes could be found here and there.

The mine was as deep as it was old, apparently, for it took a few long hours for them to get anywhere interesting.

"I am born, live and die an unlucky number of times each year. What am I?" Ranma read aloud, from the flat black surface that had suddenly blocked the way. It was obvious the black wall had been added recently, and the riddle written on it seemed to be the key.

"Interesting riddle." Cologne remarked. "Were it someone else who was asking it, however, it would be more difficult. The obvious link is a rather idiotic flaw." Cologne turned around to look at the others.

"Would you like time to reflect on this or would you rather continue right away?"

"Think on it." came Akane's quick reply, currently leaning on a wall, breathing heavily, heavy pack at her feet. She hadn't minded the weight at first, but it just had seemed to get heavier and heavier as they had progressed.

Tofu also put his bag down. "I do believe some rest is in order." he commented, glancing at Akane. "Besides, if the demon deemed necessary to put a barrier here, she must be nearby, and we must be ready once we face her."

Nabiki just shrugged and found a not too damp rock to sit on as she studied the topographic map with her small flashlight. If she had calculated her distances and directions correctly, the area they were in had an abrupt descent overhead, putting the surface not as far as it seemed. Besides, she had figured the answer to the riddle seconds after hearing it. It was rather simple.

Ranma just stood there, spotlight illuminating the writings, scratching his head. The unlucky number was obviously 13, but the described cycle was eluding him. 'Born, live and die... 13 times a year...' He snapped his fingers. "That's it!"

"Shut up!" Akane snapped back. It was more in the interest of resting quietly than thinking about the problem, however. She didn't really care, as it was a minor obstacle that the others obviously knew how to solve. Besides, she'd hear the answer once the door was opened.

A few minutes went by in silence as a bottle of water was passed around. Finally, everyone returned at the ready, Cologne uttered the answer loud and clear and the wall faded into nothingness. Seeing no complications ahead, the group pressed on.

As they walked further and further, they could hear screams and moans, at first faintly, but the sounds grew louder as they progressed. The mine shaft finally opened to a large cave, roughly twenty-five feet in height, thirty wide and about a hundred deep.

In the far left corner, a human shape seemed to be shackled to the wall, on its knees, but the bad lighting of the cave made it impossible to observe in more detail. On the wall to the right stood what looked like a crude altar, with candles, drawings, statuettes and vials covering every inch of it.

And in the middle of the cave, where the moans and screams were coming from, there were moving white sheets with two spots of black over a king-sized mattress. At that point, a long and particularly meaningful moan rose from the moving heap, and everyone understood just what was going on.

Akane immediately turned away from the sight, face red with anger. She didn't want to look at a reminder of a rather bad memory of hers.

Ranma took a few seconds to identify the parties involved, and immediately blushed and took a step back, looking away.

Cologne and Tofu looked at the scene with calm and serious expressions. "It is most fortunate that they are... distracted at the moment." the former said.

After managing to pry her eyes off the show, Nabiki took one good look at the dimensions of the cave before returning to her map. She checked her compass to verify something, looked at her watch, then grabbed Ranma by the shirt and pulled him away so they could talk.

"What is it?" he whispered, glancing once in the cave's direction, mindful of the strength of his voice.

"That thing you went off to practice yesterday afternoon, was it anything regarding what you did in the ventilation shaft on the last world?"

"Um, yeah. Long distance breaking point. But even with Cologne's training I can barely do it, and I still haven't perfect-"

"Doesn't matter if it's not perfect, can you do it?" she asked, enforcing her words by tapping her fist on the small pad holding her map.

"Yeah. Why?"

"If my calculations are correct," she began, "and they always are," she added under her breath, "there should be only about ten feet of rock between the back upper right corner of the cave and the surface. If you could blow a hole there, we could have some sunlight inside the cave to weaken her."

"Yeah, but the sun would have to be that way." Ranma said, pointing to the end of the cave. In response, Nabiki showed him both her watch and her compass. The time was 6:34 and the direction was west. Ranma smiled and went back to the cave's entrance.

"We have a plan." Ranma said as he handed his rope to Dr. Tofu. "As soon as the sunlight gets in, jump on them and tie them up while they're confused. Since they're already distracted, it shouldn't be much of a problem."

"That's very good, Ranma, but where do you plan on getting the sunlight?" Tofu was answered by Ranma taking a ready stance, hands cupped in front of him, as he gathered a small ball of chi between them.

Ranma focused on his chi, letting the flow course through his body like Cologne had taught him, shaped his chi the way he wanted by pure force of will, and after a few seconds, let it go.

"Moko Takabisha!" The small ball became an even smaller beam as the yellow chi flew straight for the upper right corner of the far wall. As it hit, a rather large section of rock flashed yellow once, but nothing else happened.

"Impressive, but what were you trying to accomplish, young man?" Cologne asked, looking at the affected area.

"Well, like I said to Nabiki, it's not perfected yet." As he finished, the section of rock flashed again before exploding, a large amount of small rocks pouring down from the hole, sunlight visible through the dust-filled air.

Sunlight that happened to illuminate the center of the cave floor, where two lovers had gone on unnoticed exterior events until now. They barely had time to remove the sheets from over them to look around before being quickly hog-tied by strong rope.

Akane and Nabiki, who had stayed behind in the charge, quickly walked to join the victors, while the victims were rapidly covered with the sheets. Hands and feet tied behind their backs, sunlight pouring on them, neither victim could do much more than lay still and let go of an interminable string of curses. "Time to exorcise." Cologne said, beginning to unpack her things.

"Hello?" a weak and hesitant voice said, from the far left corner. "Could- could you help me?"

Ranma immediately brought up his spotlight to illuminate the person. The woman had short, dark hair that was in dire need of a wash, pale skin that spoke of weeks away from the sun, clad in underwear that threatened to fall apart at any moment, and a rather large, round belly that gave no grounds for uncertainty as to what it was.

"Nabiki?!?" the five chorused.

Dawn broke in the small clearing near the hole, as black smoke rose from Ukyo's body and formed the shape of a demon's head, silently screaming in pain. Then, in a light show that would have been great had it been in any other color but black, the smoke vanished upon itself, and the ritual was complete. The demon had been exorcised, and Ukyo was free.

The girl slowly started crying, small sobs and tears at first, which turned into a full scale wail as she cried for her 'mommy' in a most childish manner. With a few well-placed taps of her cane, Cologne sent the girl to sleep.

"What's with her?" Ranma asked, the only one beside Cologne still awake, as he had had to help her with the ritual.

"She has been possessed by a demon for nearly ten years, Ranma." Cologne explained. "It may have been a mutual agreement at first, but the demon slowly ate away the poor girl's defenses until it took control completely, destroying whatever sanity she still had, up to the point that all that was left was a frightened little child, too weak, confused and innocent to understand what was going on."

"Oh." was all Ranma could say after that. He tried to change the subject. "What about... the other Nabiki? Is she all right?"

"She will be, given time. And the baby inside her no longer has demonic traces, before you ask. It will be perfectly healthy and completely human. The accelerated pregnancy has no side effects that Dr. Tofu or I can find."

Ranma let go of a breath he didn't know he had held. "That's good. But... why did Ukyo need her? I mean, she was also a girl."

"Yes, but a possession makes the body sterile. And before you ask, yes, it means the baby is both Ranma's and hers. It is fortunate they were engaged and getting along well before this, else there would have been more complications than I care to handle right now."

"I see." Ranma managed to say evenly, hiding his surprise that he had been engaged to Nabiki in this world. It seemed it wasn't so similar to his own world after all. He yawned loudly. "I'll go get some sleep before it gets too bright."

"Good idea. We shall be leaving slightly before noon, and should be getting back to the dojo in time for you to slide."

"Nice to know. Later." Curled up under a large oak tree, Ranma closed his eyes and went to sleep.

Ranma woke to find a blanket draped over him. He removed it and looked around. No one. He looked at the sun. Noon had passed long ago. "What the hell..."

"Finally awake, huh? I was just about to wake you up." He turned to face the voice. Nabiki had just gotten out of a group of bushes, and was now smirking at him.

"What happened to the others?" he asked, getting up and approaching her, blanket over a shoulder.

"Well, we figured my counterpart had had enough problems without the shock of seeing the both of us, and since the jeep is small enough as it is, I figured here is as good a place to slide for the next world as anywhere. I went back to the entrance of the mine to get our stuff and returned about an hour ago. We slide in about ten minutes, by the way."

"Ten minutes? Damn, I needed that sleep more than I thought. And, hum, how are they doing? You know, our counterparts and Ukyo?"

"Your counterpart has no memory of anything that's happened since the demon took control of him. Ukyo is basically a scared five-year-old in the body of a teenager, and my counterpart... well... I guess you could say she's in denial. It's as if nothing bad happened in the last few weeks. She's acting all nice and loving with Ranma and she's constantly rubbing her belly affectionately." She shivered. "Creeps me out. Dr. Tofu and Cologne both agreed she needs therapy, but it'll have to wait until the baby is weaned first, because she could actually go to a mental hospital once she begins facing what happened to her."

"Damn." Ranma said softly, looking down. A few moments passed in uneasy silence, both pained by the events that had occurred over the last few weeks in this strange world.

"Strange that it turns out I was engaged to you in this world, huh?"

Ranma asked out of the blue, trying to change the mood, which he didn't like one bit.

"Yeah." Nabiki replied, looking up at him. "I honestly hadn't considered the possibility, but come to think of it, since I was the one to be kidnapped, it makes sense I had to be your fiancée."

Ranma nodded, staying silent. "Speaking of which..." she continued.

He looked up at her with a small smile. "Yeah. I know. We have to talk." He motioned at the timer in her hand. "Let's go to the next world first, okay?"

"Sure. There's only twenty seconds left, anyway." The two picked up their bags, got ready, and when the big blue vortex appeared in the air, jumped in without hesitation.

End Chapter 2

Ramblings : I just want to say, before Ukyo-lovers start flaming me, that there was no specific character-target in mind when I wrote this. Every fiancée will get hers eventually, so just sit back and enjoy those chapters when they come.

And one thing. This world is not that different from canon Ranmaverse. All it took was for a demon to listen at this place and time instead of another to hear Ukyo and decide to 'help' her. Demon-Ukyo started following Ranma and Genma early, never catching up but causing a lot of destruction. Ranma noticed the papers mentioning destruction in the town he'd just been to, and by following this became a little smarter by constantly reading the papers, being engaged to Nabiki later because of this. Anyways, just my two cents.

End
file.